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# "Where the Deepening Thunders Call": Voice in Herman Melville's Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War

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# "WHERE THE DEEPENING THUNDERS CALL" VOICE IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR*

by

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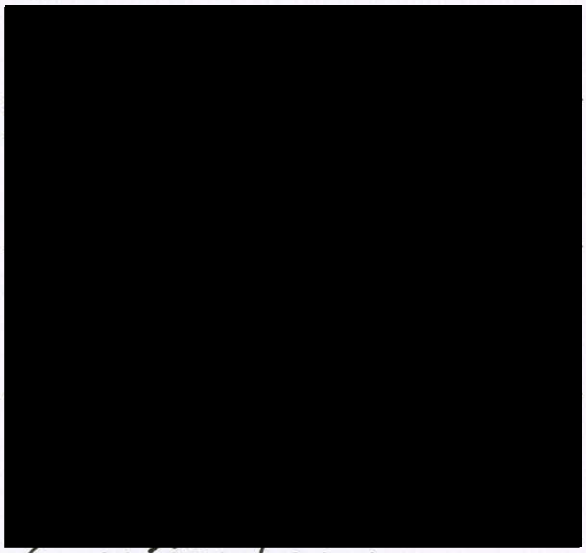

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ABSTRACT

"WHERE THE DEEPENING THUNDERS CALL" VOICE IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR*

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Scholarship has long under-appreciated Herman Melville's 1866 collection of Civil War poetry, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, partly due to the poems' inconsistent and distanced perspectives. Melville's experimental use of poetic voice and his unconventional depiction of fictional voices within the poems contribute to the collection's distanced perspectives, as well as to the volume's sometimes difficult and even awkward poetics. However, these experimental voices are also crucial to understanding Melville's attempt to describe changes in the relationship between American individuals and the nation occurring during and immediately following the tumultuous war Melville's experiments in poetic voice also denote his rumination upon the changing role of the poet in the emerging modernity of mid-nineteenth century America.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

From the time of the initial publication of Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* in August 1866, critics have consistently commented upon the restless and distanced perspectives that mark the collection of Civil War poetry. One 1866 reviewer noted that, bearing the "stamp" of Melville's "peculiar idiosyncrasy," the poems belie a "wayward mind" that is removed "from the sympathy of a large class of readers" (Scholnick 425). In 1867, William Dean Howells likewise complained that a "quality of remoteness" within the poems resulted in dry work consisting of "not words and blood, but words alone" (Kaplan xli 325). Similar criticisms endured into the late twentieth century, when prominent readers such as Edmund Wilson and Daniel Aaron likened *Battle-Pieces* to "versified journalism" and "emptied verse" (Wilson 479), or noted that "episodes of the war itself" concerned Melville "less than their latent meaning" (Aaron 78-9).

More recent scholarship tends to accept the collection's distanced perspectives as deliberate formal and descriptive strategies that Melville employed for political purposes. Taking cues from the politically-charged prose "Supplement" at the back of the book, observers such as Paul Dowling contend that the "restraint and moderation" of *Battle-Pieces* reflects the need for tempered passions and equitable political reconciliation during the period immediately following the bloody war (339). Perhaps Deak Nabers mines this vein of interpretation most fully when he explains how the dissonance between Melville's highly formalized war poetry and the war's human costs mirrors the "awkward relationship between higher and positive law in 1860s America" (3). For Nabers, poetic tension in *Battle-Pieces* registers "the gap between justice and the law and our tendency

to articulate them in terms of one another." Just as justice and law are mutually constitutive yet often at odds, argues Nabers, "the task of Reconstruction required that Southern states be both integral parts of the Union's lawmaking authority and wholly subject to it" (2). Nabers thus implies that Melville's distanced perspectives suggest the need for a post-war political model that provides the South a measure of agency within the rigid framework of federal oversight.

The poems in *Battle-Pieces* do manifest engagement with vital political questions of the war years and early Reconstruction period, but the title of the "Supplement" and its position as a back-of-the-book add-on imply that Melville felt its timely political statements are not fully articulated within the poems. Taking cues from the "Supplement" to tease concrete political statements from the poems' formal and descriptive content can lead to reductive readings and strengthen the perception that Melville's poetry does not exhibit the skill or depth of his more appreciated work as a novelist and short story writer. While critics have sometimes described Melville's turn to poetry as a product of his perceived novelistic failures, the poems of *Battle-Pieces* should be examined instead as the continuation of a writing career that consistently focused on the possibilities and restrictions that fledgling American democracy presented to selfhood and art. In this light, the narrative and formal distancing strategies Melville undertakes in *Battle-Pieces* can be interpreted as commentary upon the changing relationships among the individual, the nation, and the artist during and immediately following the Civil War.

This thesis argues that the contemplation of these changing relationships is perhaps most fully realized in *Battle-Pieces* through Melville's treatment of voice. By voice, I mean both the fictional voices represented in the poems and the various voices of the poems' speakers. Fictional voices in this reading include any communicative act of

language emanating from an identifiable source in the narrative world of a poem. I identify different poetic speakers in selected poems by changes in tone and language that occur within the works. Melville's use of punctuation and other typographical devices, such as stanza breaks, italics, and parentheses, often make these changes in tone and language readily identifiable.

With a handful of exceptions, most poems in *Battle-Pieces* lack the kind of realistic fictional voices that allow for emotional engagement with characters. Melville instead presents in his war poems a wide swath of depersonalized voices culled from the myriad forms of communication that occur during war. Melville frames these utterances, which include news reports, chants, refrains, telegraph messages, and even booming cannon blasts, with poetic speakers that take various perspectives, including the epic historian, the romantic artist, the cosmic prophet, and the calculating observer. In fact, in an era in which "the lyric I as a speaker in a dramatic monologue [had come] to dominate modern interpretation of poetry" (Jackson 183), Melville often includes alternate perspectives within particular poems to question or destabilize what first appears to be a central poetic voice.

When examining these changes in poetic perspective, I focus primarily on separate poetic voices that are included in parenthetical statements. These parenthetical remarks often denote a perspective that intrudes upon a poem from the outside, an "unassimilable voice," as William Spengeman notes (571). These unassimilable voices often undercut the authority of a poem's central speaker-subject, or lyric I; at the same time, the cacophony of wartime utterances within the poems' narrative world crowds out the individual suffering and agency that modern readers expect to encounter in war literature. The muted fictional voices within the narrative world of Melville's war poems

reflect an apprehension that the collective war effort threatened the primacy of sovereign selfhood in American society, while the alternate perspectives of Melville's secondary poetic speakers comment on the poet's changing role in a reconfigured society. These two threads parallel one another throughout the volume and often overlap to suggest the need for a national poetry that more closely reflects post-war cultural and political realities.

On one level, the changing perspectives and shifting voices of *Battle-Pieces* mirror the confusion Americans encountered during the Civil War. In addition to following massive troop movements and important battles, Americans who lived through the war witnessed a dizzying string of groundbreaking legislation and new inventions, as well as the establishment of massive new social institutions that wielded unprecedented power to order and control the nation's citizenry. To some extent, these cultural and political changes were already taking place in prior decades, particularly in the North. As the nation's growing population, increasing urbanization, and burgeoning industrialization began to displace the economic and social importance of the agrarian household, a new political economy slowly began to undermine Revolutionary ideals of individual autonomy. The "commercial republic of yeoman farmers and shopkeepers" of the Revolutionary era, in which single households controlled labor and property, began to evolve as corporations consolidated power and a market economy blossomed (Sklansky 5). While many Americans "before the Civil War had believed that industrial technology and the factory system would serve as historic instruments of Republican values, diffusing civic virtue and enlightenment along with material wealth" (Trachtenberg 38), others saw these advances as "troubling phantasms of a deeper social alienation … of American society from its roots and original strengths" (Griffin 5). As Jeffrey Sklansky

points out, early sociologists of the post-Civil War era noted this evolution and theorized the development of a new "social self," in which "the group rather than the individual was the basic agent of social relations" (5). These groups, including trade unions, professional organizations, and politically-motivated coalitions such as abolitionists and suffragists, provided individuals with collective voices and agency within the nation's ever-growing legal, political, and economic structures. Throughout the nineteenth century, Americans slowly began to comprehend their public identities "as products of social groups to which they belonged, rather than vice-versa" (131).

Industrialization emerged at different paces in different regions of America before the Civil War, but the conflict accelerated the nation's progression toward modernization. As the North began to win a war of attrition, expansion of the Union's railway system, manufacturing capabilities, and communication networks made modernization visible to rural citizens as well as urban residents. Northerners awaiting war news became more reliant on newspapers and telegraph technology, sometimes gathering in public spaces to hear the latest telegraph dispatches from the front, as depicted in one of the longer poems in *Battle-Pieces*, "Donelson." The perceived immediacy of mass communications connected civilians to their fellow townspeople, as well as to friends and relatives who fought on the front. This technology marked a conflation of space and time that led some contemporary observers to feel that a "fundamental shift" in Americans' very "manner of existence" had occurred (Fahs 19). On the battlefront, more than two million soldiers who participated in the war directly witnessed the technical and administrative capabilities of modern military, corporate, and governmental organizations. The soldiers also witnessed the deadly consequences of technological and manufacturing breakthroughs, such as repeating rifles, long-range cannons, and ironclad warships. For

both combatants and non-combatants, then, the war era highlighted "All the markers of American modernity" (Griffin 5).

The Civil War's terrifying violence lent profundity to the nation's growing emphasis on connectivity and collective effort. Personal sacrifices for the Union and Confederate causes simultaneously stressed and called into question the individual's significance to the nation. Armies on both sides of the conflict organized men in the hundreds of thousands. These fighters were farmers, laborers, and youth, rather than the professional soldiers and mercenaries who often fought in earlier wars. For millions of Americans, the "obligation of the citizen to the nation was expressed as a willingness to risk life itself" (Faust 103). The Civil War's unimaginable human costs—over 600,000 dead and as many as 46,000 casualties in a single battle—transformed ultimate personal sacrifice into anonymous statistics that were presented to the populace on a daily basis (McConnell 17). While early newspaper reports heralded some of the North's first fallen war heroes, the lengthy conflict eventually meant that most individual deaths were noted only as names in a list or even numbers on casualty rolls. The widespread publication of these lists made dying for one's country both anonymous and public. With such high casualty rates, soldiers facing battlefield terrors sometimes "found it a relief to think of themselves not as men but as machines," while those waiting for news at home eventually endured a "loss of feeling" that "was at base a loss of self" (Faust 59-60). Citizens not only melted into the mass during the war; their willingness to sacrifice life and loved ones became inextricably bound to the survival of the nation. Rather than a loss of self, then, we might see the war's survivors as experiencing at least the beginnings of a profound transformation of self. Individual identity melded with the nation in new ways, and the nation became perceived as "a powerful abstraction" to Americans, rather than a

network of local communities and families (Fahs 11). As Stuart McConnell has explained, an "ideal self of nation" emerged within this abstraction, a selfhood in which uniformity, self-sacrifice and orderliness allowed the individual to fulfill personal responsibilities to a modern society, often through participation in a social group or professional organization. As a result, social tensions such as "Order versus disorder, nationalism versus localism, [and] the self-discipline of the Army of the Potomac versus self-expression … all were destined to be played out over the next 30 years across the American North" (14).

Melville had begun to explore in his fiction the social tensions inherent in an emerging modernity, and their implications for evolving notions of selfhood, long before the war. In two of his more prominent magazine stories of the 1850s—"Bartleby" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids"—Melville used the concept of voice as a literary device to describe the changing relationship between the individual and emerging social structures brought about through industrialization. In addition to tying modernization to the death of individual identity, these stories portray unreliable narrators to comment on the tenuous relationships between art, authorship, and modern society.

Alienated and unknowable, the title character in "Bartleby" signifies the loss of self that results from the automaton drudgery of a Wall Street scrivener. Throughout the story, the narrator—Bartleby's unnamed employer—links the scrivener's repetitive work copying legal documents to his enigmatic lack of personal identity. According to the narrator, Bartleby initially "did an extraordinary amount of writing," and apparently "long famishing for something to copy . . . seemed to gorge himself on his work" (12). Internalizing the mindless task of reproducing documents that circulate in America's finance, law, and government sectors, Bartleby at first represents the perfect cog in a

societal machine. This loss of personal identity makes Bartleby a ghostly presence in the narrator's mind, as Bartleby performs his tasks "silently, palely, mechanically" (12). Once Bartleby moves into the office—a further conflation of his private and public selves—the narrator describes the scrivener's presence in terms of his haunting "austere reserve" and "pallid haughtiness" (24).

Only voice, in the form of Bartleby's qualified refusal to work ("I would prefer not to") provides the scrivener with a somewhat passive, yet unnerving, agency in the eyes of the narrator (13). Although the narrator prods Bartleby to speak more throughout the story, Bartleby's simple statement signifies his decision to follow internal authority rather than the dictates of an emerging professional culture that defined the individual in terms of productivity. At the same time, Bartleby's decision to move into the narrator's offices represents a claim on property and the usurpation of public or professional space. While Bartleby's initial internalization of a scrivener's work transforms him into a wraith in the mind of the narrator, the scrivener's final reassertion of sovereign selfhood, through his voice and his claims on public properties, signifies a renegotiation with selfhood within modernity, one that leads to Bartleby's eventual imprisonment and physical death in a New York City jail.

The women who labor in a New England paper mill in the second half of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" likewise sacrifice their personal identities to modern production. These women produce the paper on which legal documents might be written, presumably by the wealthy lawyers portrayed in the first half of Melville's diptych. Like Bartleby, the women represent a hidden source of official documents that will circulate throughout society's legal systems and major institutions. Unlike Bartleby, the pallid virgins lack even passive voice:

> The human voice was banished from the spot. Machinery—the vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery but as mere cogs to the wheels (278).

The women sacrifice not only their individual selfhood to the system they feed, but also their family life, as they exchange their natural reproductive abilities for a different kind of labor. Melville implies that this barrenness extends to a societal level, as well. In addition to producing paper for the bachelors' legal documents, the women produce paper that is folded into envelopes for the story's narrator, a seed salesman who uses the envelopes to mail his product to customers. The narrator, who initially describes the women laborers as "rows of blank looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding paper" (277), is thus as implicated in the women's silent suffering as the bachelors. Just as the bachelor lawyers write their briefs upon the paper without considering the work entailed in the paper's making, the narrator ultimately writes his story over the women's blank silence.

Significantly, both "Bartleby" and "Tartarus" end with voice effects—"Ah, Bartleby, Ah humanity!" and "Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And Oh! Tartarus of Maids!" (46, 286). Presented as Eureka! moments, these false epiphanies call into question the efficacy of storytelling and language in the presence of modernity. Rather than deliver a decipherable lesson in regard to each story, the ending statements ambiguously place the scrivener's fate alongside the broader human condition in "Bartleby," and situate the carefree bachelors alongside the repressed women laborers in "Tartarus." In that "what was expected to be learned was not," readers are left "to question both what might be known and what can be represented as knowable" (Colatrella 67). Melville thus shows

that the narrators in these stories dichotomize rather than unify and question the efficacy of writing and language. These stories turn back on themselves to comment on the role of the artist amid a de-individuating modernity.

Melville's storytellers become suspect in the sense that their intentions are never fulfilled, or even clear. Yet readers do grasp clear meanings from these stories, once they make the connections that Melville's narrators seem to miss. It is as if the narrators understand the stories are significant, but are too enmeshed in the political, economic, and social world they comment on to understand why. Their almost instinctual decision to select the particular tales they narrate is the lynchpin that allows meaning to emerge. This is particularly evident in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," as the narrator's initial decision to relate his experiences with the wealthy lawyers and ghostly women laborers side by side invites readers to make connections, even if those connections are vague to the narrator himself. Thus, when Melville wrote about modernity and changing notions of selfhood during the 1850s, he created narrators who presented meaningful vistas for readers, but he did not provide a stable narrative platform from which to view them. These narrators renegotiated authorship and their role as social commentators even as they described the renegotiation of selfhood that modernity forced others to face.

# CHAPTER II

## "RIVET ME HERE TO DUTY FAST!": GUNS THAT SPEAK AND THE LOSS OF INDIVIDUAL VOICE

Similar to the lost identities that mark Melville's famous short stories of the 1850s, the identities and individual suffering of Civil War soldiers are muted throughout *Battle-Pieces*. In fact, because *Battle-Pieces* is a work devoted to chronicling America's bloodiest war, the complete absence of individual soldiers within most of the volume's poems is one of the book's most striking characteristics. On the book's original title page, Melville dedicates the collection to the "THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND" Union soldiers who died in the war. The rounded-off casualty statistic set in large uppercase type serves as a dramatic reminder of the war's astounding sacrifice and destruction, but within most of the book's poems, Melville similarly treats *en masse* the common soldiers who bore the brunt of the war's violence. Characterization is rare, and Melville often limits human voices to public shouts and yells or battlefield shrieks and screams. Unlike much war poetry of the Civil War era, *Battle-Pieces* contains "relatively few evocations of individual's personal sorrow, no poems representing letters to or from soldiers, and few poems focused on one individual's sorrow" (Barrett 36). Distanced third person speakers guide readers through most of the volume's poetry, and these speakers most often relate events from what Robert Milder calls a "macro-historical perspective" (99). This perspective places epic importance on the general movements of war, but results in poems that lack the subjective experiences of authentic characters.

Recent analyses of voice in *Battle-Pieces* tend to focus on the volume's multiplicity of generic voice effects, including journalism, popular songs, and refrains. Critics note that these formal poetic devices reflect broad democratic concerns rather than

engage with suffering and death. Faith Barrett, for example, contends that Melville mixes "high and popular voice effects" to "critique a nationalist poetry" and investigate "the consolations that a [new] nationalist poetry might offer" (35-6). Megan Williams similarly posits that Melville's extensive use of choruses makes visible the possibility of a "democratic consensus" in post-bellum America, a consensus based on verbal and written communication (142). For Milder, the polyphony of *Battle-Pieces* provides readers with a "meditation of voices and points of view" that comments on democracy more ambiguously (175). Meanwhile, he notes, individual soldiers fade into an "anonymous mass" of "nameless followers" that mainly serves as background for the work as a whole (175).

Although collective voices, such as those evoked by refrains and choruses, might suggest a form of consensus in *Battle-Pieces*, the consensus portrayed is not necessarily synonymous with democratic agency. In fact, examining fictive voices in *Battle-Pieces* reveals that wartime consensus most often subjugates individuals and erases identity. Rather than simply providing background for the volume, this loss of individuality serves as a significant theme in *Battle-Pieces*. This theme occurs in at least two related forms in regard to fictive voices. In poems that depict battle scenes, Melville often juxtaposes muted human voices with the personified voices of guns and cannons to suggest the loss of voice that groups and individuals experience when engulfed in war. In poems that depict events at the war's periphery, such as the public reading of news reports in a town square, collective voices drown out individual voices or push them to the margins.

The loss of individual voices within the narrative world of the poems is often linked to deadly technological advances, as "screaming" cannon blasts or "shrieking" bullets dominate the aural sense of poems depicting battlefields (132, 122). When the

guns of *Battle-Pieces* speak in this way, Melville shows how war fundamentally transforms society and silences individuals. The personified weaponry of *Battle-Pieces* points to changes in the relationship between language and violence that occur during war, changes that ultimately mute the voices of individual citizens. In peacetime, discourse serves as the antithesis of violence because it allows citizens to navigate a democratic society's social institutions. Citizens use official language to implement a nation's legal system and avoid any threat of violence when they come into conflict with the state, competing private groups, or fellow citizens. However, as James Dawes has noted, the language of governments often becomes twisted and inauthentic as state power is mobilized during times of war. Propaganda replaces civic information as the prevailing mode of official communication, while government dispatches are often "censored, encrypted, and euphemized" to hide official intentions (2). The approach of war also disrupts communication between nations, as "imperative replaces dialogue," governments recall their ambassadors and then eventually call off negotiations altogether (2). Ultimately, nations engaged in open war "communicate their intentions most dramatically through the use of injury rather than symbol" (2). At this stage, communication transforms into violent power, power that, "through trauma and injury, disables the capacity of the individual to speak effectively" (2).

In *Battle-Pieces*, Melville describes flying bullets and cannon blasts in terms of voice to indicate the wartime transformation of communication into violence, and the resulting silencing of individuals. In "The Battle for the Mississippi," for instance, the dull bloodhound "bay" of a cannon cuts through the "din of larger strife" as the battle's most palpable sound, drowning out the screams and yells of fighting sailors and soldiers (91). In "Running the Batteries," the cannon of a Union warship "answers" the "roars"

emanating from Confederate guns on shore (100). "Ponderous speaks every monster gun," the poem's speaker notes, pointing to the cannon's inevitable domination over the soldiers who "spake no more" (101). Blasts from a cornered ironclad in "The Battle for the Bay" are "ribald curses" (127), and the speaker in "Gettysburg" emphasizes the "shriek of shells--/Aerial screamings, taunts and yells" emanating from weapons during a Confederate charge, rather than the famous (and human) Rebel Yell (106). In these poems, violent communication between armies and governments mutes groups of human voices through sheer volume and destruction. In contrast, the Confederate guns in "Sheridan at Cedar Creek" directly summon the Union cavalry officer, "calling, calling" from "Miles away," like mythical sirens beckoning him into battle (128). The collective voices of Sheridan's soldiers are noted, first when they "cheered him in the looming" as he silently answered his summons and rode to battle, and then, after the victory, when the Union camp "Rang with laughter of the host" (129). Yet the poem ends reminding the reader of those soldiers who were silenced forever: "But no knowledge in the grave/Where the nameless followers sleep" (129). When societies communicate through guns and cannons, Melville suggests, humans who are involved in the conflict speak in collective voices or not at all.

Melville's treatment of gun and cannon voices also indicates that the destructive power of nations engaged in war can become a naturalizing force that rapidly transforms society. Melville depicts this process most clearly in "The Swamp Angel," a poem about a personified cannon. Melville states in an endnote that the eight-inch Parrott gun known as the Swamp Angel was "employed in the prolonged, though at times intermitted bombardment of Charleston" (230), but the cannon fired upon the city during just two nights in August 1864. After firing thirty-five times, the cannon became too damaged to

continue. During the two-night bombardment, citizens evacuated the section of Charleston closest to the cannon, but none were killed and casualties were few. In "Swamp Angel," Melville elongates this time frame and exaggerates the bombardment's damage to the city. In doing so, Melville suggests that the destructive power represented by the Swamp Angel can create fundamental societal changes that might otherwise take years or decades to evolve.

As the site of Fort Sumter, Charleston represents the rebellious South and the siege stands in for the wider war. The booming reports from the Swamp Angel can be read as answers to the South's opening shots upon Fort Sumter, the moment when communication between the North and South first devolved into violence. Melville underscores this sense when he notes the Swamp Angel's "coal black Afric lip," which not only establishes the cannon as a speaking organ, but also alludes to the war's central debate over slavery (122).

The poem's prosody mimics the sustained bombardment of a city and suggests that the power of the Swamp Angel now dominates this debate. The first three stanzas have eight iambic lines and an ABCB rhyme scheme, with each rhyming line ending in an accented syllable. The resulting repetition reflects the inevitability of the bombardment's destruction, as does the demoniac authority of the cannon's voice. The Swamp Angel "breathes with a breath that is blastment/And dooms by a far decree," delivering with each firing a speech act—"a scream that screams up the zenith" (122). As Northern ordnance grinds down the will of the citizens of the rebellious city, they can answer the cannon only with collective "wails and shrieks" (122). These primal utterances suggest a complete breakdown of language, and thus civilization, within the city.

This breakdown continues in the fourth stanza, as the narrative of the poem more fully transitions from a description of the cannon to a description of the cannon's effect on the city. This stanza has eleven lines instead of eight, and the relentless prosody of the poem's opening paragraphs breaks:

> Swift is his messengers' going,
>
> But slowly he saps their halls,
>
> As if by delay deluding.
>
> They move from their crumbling walls
>
> Farther and farther away;
>
> But the Angel sends after and after,
>
> By night with the flame of his ray—
>
> By night with the voice of his screaming—
>
> Sends after them, stone by stone,
>
> And farther walls fall, farther portals,
>
> And weed follows weed through the Town. (123)

The poem's dominant rhyme scheme and pace continue through the first four lines of this stanza, with the second and fourth lines ending in accented rhymes. However, the period in the third line is a hiccup that subtly interrupts the poem's rhythm, just as the poem's perspective shifts from the cannon to the city. Thereafter, punctuation increasingly complicates rhythm and the rhyme scheme changes to ABAC before falling away altogether. This devolution coincides with the destruction of the city, with the repetition of words—" farther," "after," "night," "stone," and "weed"—representing the inescapable nature of that destruction. The destruction is manmade, yet somehow also natural, as the cannon's shells are transformed from personified "messengers" into a

"ray" that rains upon the city as unyielding stone. Nature follows the path of the Swamp Angel's mechanized power, overtaking the city's rubble as "weed follows weed through the Town." Weeds among ruins, the city scene evokes fallen civilizations such as ancient Rome or Athens. Fundamental societal destruction, and a deep historical transition, is underway.

The poem's sixth and penultimate stanza returns to the dominant prosody of "Swamp Angel," as if a new reality has arisen from the rapid destruction and re-naturalization of the city. Melville characterizes this new reality as an upended social order, and as a silencing of the previous era's dominant voices:

> Is this the proud City? The scorner
>
> Which never would yield the ground?
>
> Which mocked at the coal-black Angel?
>
> The cup of despair goes round.
>
> Vainly she calls upon Michael
>
> (The white man's seraph was he),
>
> For Michael has fled from his tower
>
> To the Angel over the sea. (123)

The brute force of the cannon renders powerless the collective voice that mocked the North at Fort Sumter and once silenced the voice of African Americans, as suggested in the "coal-black Afric lip" of the opening stanza (122). A cruel social structure based on slavery and European tradition lies in ruins, creating the possibility for a new America. The poem warns that the futility of Charleston's collective voice extends to Northerners, as well: "Who weeps for the woeful City," begins the poem's final stanza, "Let him weep for our guilty kind" (123). Sharing in the nation's original sin, the North will likewise

share in the upcoming painful, but ultimately natural, reordering. The poem's final lines imply that such transformation is incomplete without reconciliation between the North and South, however: "Who joys at her wild despairing—/Christ, the Forgiver, convert his mind" (123). In contrast to the poem's allusions to angels—both the archangel Michael and the Swamp Angel itself—the evocation of Christ suggests that a new America can return to a more direct connection with truth or God. The monstrous power of the Swamp Angel must play its part before the re-naturalization of America can occur.

The brute force and terrifying volume of weaponry transforms society in the "The Swamp Angel," but in several of the *Battle-Pieces,* Melville also shows how individual voices become absorbed into the war machine. These poems suggest that the silencing of individuals is often a voluntary process that occurs when soldiers and citizens unite in collective effort. For soldiers fighting in the war, this process is perhaps depicted most fully in four warship poems that take inspiration from the two-day Battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862. On the first day of the Battle of Hampton Roads, the Virginia, a Confederate ironclad also known as the Merrimac, destroyed two wooden-hulled Union battleships, including the Cumberland. The Union ironclad Monitor arrived at Hampton Roads on the evening of the first day and prepared for the world's first battle between two armored warships, occurring the following day. The famous battle marked the obsolescence of traditional sailed warships, and Melville's cluster of warship poems ties this passing to the destruction of individuality that occurs in modern armies.

The rolling rhythm of "The Cumberland" mimics the rocking of sailing under wind power, a sensory appeal that parallels the poem's celebration of physical verbalization. "Some names there are of telling sound/Whose voweled syllable free" opens the poem, which is in large part a consideration of the word, and name,

Cumberland (82). The poem has a consistent, singsong ABABCC rhyme scheme in its main stanzas, which relate the story of the sinking of the ship during the first day of the battle. A three-line refrain interrupts the main stanzas three times and then serves as the poem's ending. Similar to the poem's opening line, the refrain repeatedly considers the physical act of articulating the name of the ship. The first iteration of the refrain—"Sounding name as ere was sung/Flowing, rolling on the tongue--/Cumberland! Cumberland!" is repeated with similar variations (82). One iteration invites the reader to "Slowly roll it on the tongue," evoking the reader's own physical body as well as the name of the ship (83). This oral conceit strengthens the poem's strong central speaker's contention that the ship's name, which remains "Unswallowed by the swallowing sea," endures, though only through song and legend (82). In contrast, an anonymous sailor "leaping out the port" is "Washed back" like food or wine (82). This imagery suggests that, while war kills sailors and soldiers, those who glamorize the war through songs and poems such as "The Cumberland" ultimately consume them. The true nature of the war's individual participants—their hopes and thoughts and everyday existence—becomes lost in the re-telling of the war's great events.

The opening line of "In the Turret" similarly plays on name and identity, but in this poem the fate of the individual and the ship are closely entwined in life, as well as in death. The opening line—"Your honest heart of duty, Worden/So helped you that in fame you dwell" (84)—refers to John L. Worden, captain of the *Monitor* during the Battle of Hampton Roads. The captain's name signifies individual identity, but it also evokes words and language. The poem places Worden within the claustrophobic iron enclosure that held the ship's main gun, "Cribbed in a craft which like a log/Was washed by every billow's motion" (84). Worden fights to retain courage as dawn of the second day of

battle approaches, and fetal imagery such as "cribbed" and "every billows motion" suggest that the captain might emerge from the cramped space with a new identity, one in which he overcomes his fear (84). When taking the captain's name as an evocation of "word," the imagery might denote the birth of a new language, or poetry, that escapes the iron structure of the turret to enter into the undulations of formless nature (84). Yet this creates a false expectation, as Melville suggests that nature has become hybridized with machinery in the next stanza, when a "spirit forewarning" answers Worden's morning prayer:

> A prayer went up—a champion's. Morning
>
> Beheld you in the Turret walled
>
> By adamant, where a spirit forewarning
>
> And all-deriding called:
>
> "Man darest thou—desperate, unappalled—
>
> Be first to lock thee in the armored tower?
>
> I have thee now; and what the battle-hour
>
> To me shall bring—heed well—thou'lt share;
>
> This plot-work, planned to be the foeman's terror,
>
> To thee may prove a goblin-snare;
>
> Its very strength and cunning—monstrous error!" (84-85)

On one hand, the malevolent voice clearly reflects the thoughts and fears of Worden as he takes his place in the claustrophobic turret; on the other hand, the phrase "I have thee now" suggests that the voice emanates from the turret itself. This creates the sense that Worden's voice has become one with the turret, and his identity is inextricably bound to the warship. This sense is strengthened in the voice's statement that Worden will share

the turret's fate. In the next stanza, Worden accepts this common fate when he answers the spirit:

> "Stand up, my heart; be strong; what matter
>
> If here thou seest thy welded tomb?
>
> And let huge Og with thunders batter—
>
> Duty be still my doom,
>
> Though drowning come in liquid gloom;
>
> First duty, duty next, and duty last;
>
> Ay, Turret, rivet me here to duty fast!" (85)

Riveted to the hard iron walls of the turret, Worden, and language, become one with the nation's war machine, due to the captain's sense of patriotic duty. Pointedly iterated with a beginning, middle, and an end, like a story, the concept of "duty" becomes a master narrative that modifies the captain's sense of identity. As Worden internalizes "the militaristic state he serves" and "submits his autonomy to the war machine" (Sweet 166), he voluntarily sacrifices the self not only to nation, but also to the Monitor's legend.

In contrast to the first two poems in Melville's warship cluster, the final two poems do not mention individual sailors. Where the swallowed sailor in "The Cumberland," and Worden in his riveted state, signify absorption of individual identity into a naturalized war machine, the absence of individual sailors in "The Temeraire" and "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight" more fully questions the subjective perspective of the poet. The focus shifts from individual identity in wartime to the poet's authority in relating war and its meaning.

"The Temeraire" describes the glories of wooden sailing vessels and mourns their disappearance from modern warfare, but Melville immediately begins to interrogate this

perspective when he de-centers the poem's central speaker in a parenthetical subtitle—"(Supposed to have been suggested to an Englishman of the old order by the fight of the Monitor and Merrimac.)" This subtitle implies that the poem represents a second-hand account, handed down through previous generations and European poetic tradition, as the Englishman "of the old order" suggests. The word "Supposed" even suggests that the voice within the parentheses questions the source of the poem, or the poem's central voice, and an endnote further questions the poem's veracity and the authority of its speaker. In the endnote, Melville states that the Temeraire, a British ship that fought in the Battle of Trafalgar and was scuttled in 1839, "commends itself to the mind seeking for some one craft to stand for the poetic ideal of those great wooden warships" (228). The poem, then, mourns the loss of symbols and ideals as much as it mourns the loss of the more literal "full-sailed fleets" and "Ships-of-the-line" that allowed Great Britain to dominate the seas (228). "The Temeraire" ends in indignity for the wooden ship; a modern "pygmy steam-tug" tows the vessel to shore, where anonymous workers dismantle its guns, spars and flags (87). Melville implies that traditional European poetic ideals have become similarly denuded. The modern American war poet practices an art that, like the modern "pygmy steam-tug," is more indigenous and yet more mechanized (87).

In "The Cumberland," "In the Turret," and "The Temeraire," Melville traces the disappearance of individual sailors in romanticized war literature and poetry. The speaker of "The Cumberland" establishes the absorption of sailors who are swallowed in the tale of a glorious ship, while "In the Turret" implies that Worden voluntarily forsakes identity at least partly to become part of the glory of storytelling. In "The Temeraire," Melville's secondary voices—in the parenthetical subtitle and the end note—combine with the

romantic description of a legendary war vessel to imply that the true individuality of sailors has been missing from war narratives and poetry all along. Leading into the warship cluster's final poem, then, Melville suggests that glorifying war heroes erases their individual identity as they become one with the epic events in which they act. In "Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," Melville seems to call for a new form of war poetry with a more objective, mechanized perspective. Rather than replace the individual with a symbolic ship, however, this form ruminates upon the collective effort of the war, or even society as a whole.

The opening stanza of "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight" clearly announces a poem about mechanized poetry:

> PLAIN be the phrase, yet apt the verse,
>
> More ponderous than nimble;
>
> For since grimed War here laid aside
>
> His Orient pomp, 'twould ill befit
>
> Overmuch to ply
>
> The rhyme's barbaric cymbal. (89)

Just as the denuded modern warships in this poem are driven by "plain mechanic power/Plied cogently," more forceful poetry is needed to describe modern warfare and its participants (89). In contrast to the inspired musicality of "The Cumberland," this poem envisions an exacting art. The "ringing of plates on plates" and "clanging of the blacksmith's fray" emanating from unknown workshops and factories replace the rolling articulation of a name, while organized manufacture replaces individual heroics (89). A distanced poetic speaker considers broader social concerns rather than the fate of individuals, while the musicality and symbolism of earlier poetry, evoked in the last

line's "cymbal" (and its homophone "symbol") have become inauthentic in describing war. The modifier "barbaric" suggests these poetic devices have become inappropriate in describing civilizations that are capable of producing a modern navy, as well. The factories, workshops and anonymous craftsmen of "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight" also imply that modern war poetry should interrogate events occurring away from the battlefield. Because a modern conflict such as the Civil War is dependent upon collective effort and manufacturing capabilities, its most profound effects are cultural as well as individual. In this poem, aesthetics are beside the point and Melville implies that describing an inhuman war in terms of individual heroism not only inaccurately portrays a modern war, it erases the true nature of the individuals involved.

Several poems in *Battle-Pieces* depict muted, silenced, and inauthentic voices to imply that a loss of individuality occurs on the periphery of the war as well as on the battlefield. These muted or inauthentic voices belong to Union soldiers and northern citizens more often than to Southerners. At times, the voices of the war dead hold more power than the spoken words of survivors. For example, "Magnanimity Baffled" is a poem that relates the voice of a Union officer who visits a Confederate officer in a field hospital, after a battle. The two soldiers knew one another before the war, as the poem's opening—"Sharp words we had before the fight"—implies (159). As the Union officer tries to reconnect with his Confederate counterpart, it becomes clear to the reader that the war's violence and the rebel's injuries continue to prevent authentic communication. The Union officer, identified only as "the Victor," pays homage to the rebel's honor with empty platitudes, while offering his own hand in renewed friendship. The rebel, who lies on a cot, "Turned to the wall" and silent, appears to rebuff the talkative Victor (59). In the short poem's closing lines, the Victor forcefully grabs the rebel's hand only to find that it

is limp in death. This ironic ending underscores the self-serving nature of the Victor's magnanimity. Old codes of traditional honor, and language itself, become empty when a negotiation is settled through violent force. Thus, the rebel's dead silence ultimately conveys the poem's message more effectively than anything he could have said.

Inauthentic speech also marks the early parts of the much longer piece, "Armies of the Wilderness." The opening stanzas of this narrative poem relate scenes from life on the front leading up to the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. Grant's Army of the Potomac and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia wintered on either side of the Rapidan River in Virginia before the battle. The long period between fighting provided time for soldiers of each army to develop daily routines, and to watch the routines and habits of opposing troops. In the poem's second stanza, the close proximity of the armies appears to give Union troops a more human perspective in regard to the Confederates: "Through the pointed glass our soldiers saw/the base-ball bounding sent," Melville's speaker notes, "They could have joined them in their sport/But for the vale's deep rent" (113). Confederate camaraderie, as the rebel troops throw and catch the ball in friendly exchanges, parallels the daily coexistence between the two armies. The Northerners eventually come to understand the rebels as "froward kin," who, though "zealots of the wrong," exhibit the same human characteristics as the Union soldiers (113).

This tentative mutual understanding disappears in the following stanza, as a captured Confederate soldier mocks and scorns his Union captors. When questioned, the rebel identifies Confederate units only by state of origin before pointing to his own unit—"the ten Camps *there*—ask your grave pits [who we are]; they'll tell" (114). Unlike the silence of the pastoral baseball scene, this face-to-face communication occurs in the de-individuating language of war. The rebel identifies Confederate soldiers only by group,

and his own unit only by number and its effectiveness in battle. This identification reflects the organizational structure of the military. When he points to the graves of Union dead, the poem not only suggests that his "reverence for death [is] lost" in a wilderness overrun by two armies (Cappucci 167), it attributes this loss to the primacy of the group over the existence of the individual. As mediator between the two forces, the rebel becomes an organ of the war machine and loses his individual identity as well.

# CHAPTER III

## "THE ANGUISH NONE CAN DRAW": COLLECTIVE VOICE AND THE LOSS OF THE SUBJECT

While weaponry and mass destruction lead to the loss of individual voice in Melville's war poetry that depicts events near the battlefield, many poems in the collection depict a loss of selfhood in environments far removed from the front. In "Donelson," for example, the voices of townspeople become wholly subject to official dispatches describing the events of a battle occurring in another state. These dispatches create fellow feeling among the townspeople, who gather each day in driving rain and snow to hear the dispatches read aloud. Weather is significant in this poem, as the dispatches relate the same harsh conditions at the battle, allowing the townspeople to more closely identify with the fighting soldiers. The townspeople react to the dispatches with collective optimism when good news arrives from the front, and with despair when dispatches relate defeat and the hardships that the soldiers undergo. Their reactions, and voices, become one, and Melville shows in "Donelson," as well as in other poems, how war can erode individual identity throughout a culture.

"Donelson" consists partly of long, italicized sections that represent the text of the dispatches as they are being read in the town square. Non-italicized stanzas of varying length interrupt the dispatch text to describe the reactions of the townspeople. Early in the poem, the stanzas describing townspeople contain short descriptions and voices of individual citizens, who comment both on the crowd and on the breaking news. "'No seeing here,' cries one—'don't crowd," appears in the opening stanza, indicating individuals who jostle and elbow for personal space (68). A "cross patriot" comments, "'Twill drag along—drag along," while a "stripling shill" cries "'Hurrah for Grant,'"

eliciting cries and cheers from the crowd (72). These cheers signal a consensus, which grows and solidifies when a "Copperhead" Democrat, opposed to the war, passes the crowd, sneering and arguing with townspeople (72). The townspeople answer the Copperhead collectively with "A shower of broken ice and snow," a parallel to the real fighting occurring at Donelson (73). "Each bystander," notes Melville's speaker, then saw the Copperhead "hustled round the corner go," as if taken away by police (73). "And each bystander said—'Well suited him'" (73). While each bystander in this scene denotes an individual, the bystanders' shared vision and speech suggest that a rigid consensus has formed, to the point that the townspeople's senses become one. The townspeople's agreement with the Copperhead's arrest implies that this consensus meshes with the power of official authority or government.

The violent act and collective opposition to the Copperhead marks a transition in the poem's descriptions of the crowd. This rigid consensus continues through the remainder of the poem, as the poem's speaker no longer specifically identifies individuals such as the "cross patriot" or "stripling shill," but instead describes the townspeople in collective terms, such as "the crowd" or "the throng" (81). The poem also depicts speech acts as either collective shouts or as shouted phrases that emanate from the crowd, without further attribution. When more bad news arrives from the battle, it becomes clear that the inner feelings of individual townspeople have become universal to them all:

> Flitting faces took the hue
> Of that washed bulletin-board in view,
> And seemed to bear the public grief
> As private, and uncertain of relief;
> Yea, many an earnest heart was won,

As broodingly he plodded on,

To find in himself some bitter thing,

Some hardness in his lot as harrowing

As Donelson. (77)

The townspeople's "Flitting faces" make them unrecognizable as individuals. The emotions usually evidenced in facial expression cannot be separated from the bulletin-board news, suggesting that public news becomes private feeling. When "many an earnest heart" evolves into the singular "he" in the following line, the poem suggests that each individual's yearning to empathize with the soldiers on the front connects him inextricably to the other townspeople. In the poem's final stanzas, this new unity is fully realized once the townspeople hear news of Union victory. As "hand grasped hand, and glances met/In happy triumph," shared anxiety turns into victorious celebration (81). Lights shine late from "Windows bright," and "from the deep street came the frequent shout;/While some in prayer, as these in glee,/Blessed heaven for the winter-victory" (81). Whether the speech act is a public shout or private prayer, meanings are the same when fellow feeling binds the townspeople in victorious unity.

In the poem's penultimate stanza, however, Melville suggests that empathy for individual suffering has been forgotten in the collective celebration of military victory. While most townspeople celebrate publicly, some suffer silently through the night:

But others were who wakeful laid

In midnight beds, and early rose,

And, feverish in the foggy snows,

Snatched the damp paper—wife and maid.

The death-list like a river flows

Down the pale sheet,

And there the whelming waters meet. (81)

In contrast to the other townspeople, these forgotten and silent women are fully individuated through their grief and mourning. At the same time, however, their tears mix with wet snow to erase the inked names of their loved ones. In a sense, they have become one with an environment of "foggy snows" and "damp paper." Along with the names of the dead soldiers, the silenced women disappear into the stream of tears and ink where "the whelming waters meet."

Water and river imagery marks the disappearance of the individual within the collective throughout *Battle-Pieces*. Just as the wet snows and rain bring townspeople together, and tentatively bind them to soldiers fighting at the front, in "Donelson," storms, rivers, and other whelming waters often represent collective effort and "excesses of popular feeling" within the collection (Milder 178). The second poem of *Battle-Pieces*, "Misgivings," establishes this connection and ties it to voice. Here, "ocean clouds" storm into a northern town and destroy a church steeple, destruction that serves as a portent of the war's coming violence, as "storms are formed behind the storm we feel" suggests (53). The destructive storm also presages a building collective voice, as the storm "shouts the torrents down the gorges go" (53). These torrents, rivers, and flooding waters appear throughout the collection, ultimately representing the buildup of collective power at an increasing rate as the poems describe the last days of the war. In "The Fall of Richmond," New York City crowds are described as "seas that sway" (142), and "The Muster" describes 200,000 victorious troops who parade through Washington D.C. as "watery multitudes," "a watershed of waves" whose movements appear as "surf upon the sands" (151). When the gathered crowd shouts and cheers for the soldiers, "torrent cries to

torrent/the rapids hail the fall" (151). The victorious Union army and the masses ultimately form a powerful unity in the confluence of a raging waterfall.

The unstoppable power of a victorious collective is possibly most visible in "The March to the Sea," a poem that recounts Sherman's scorched earth military campaign, which ultimately broke the South's resolve. The poem describes the victorious Union Army as a force of nature that traverses the countryside as an unstoppable river, while cavalry units flanking the army create "zigzags" that "mazed the land," much like a river delta (137). A growing mass of freed slaves and captured animals follows the army and shares in its power, as it "streamed like rivers" and "poured and swelled" across the countryside (138). The poem's twelve-line stanzas are split by typography that increasingly indents the final six lines, creating the appearance of incoming tide on a beach. Each stanza ends in a two-line refrain, in which the speaker first notes, "It was glorious glad marching," then characterizes the march with slight variations of "bold" and "free" in the second line (137). In the penultimate stanza, however, the refrain—"It was glorious glad marching/But ah, the stern decree!"—implies that the combined power of the military and its attendant mob comes at a cost (139). The poem pivots on this suggestion:

> For behind they left a wailing
>
> A terror and a ban,
>
> And blazing cinders sailing,
>
> And houseless households wan,
>
> Wide zones of counties paling,
>
> And towns where maniacs ran.
>
> Was it Treason's retribution—

Necessity the plea?

They will long remember Sherman

And his streaming columns free—

They will long remember Sherman

Marching to the sea. (139)

The final stanza recasts the passing of Sherman's army as the site of chaos and destruction, where maniacs rampage through towns and houses. "[H]ouseless households" suggests a complete breakdown of an agricultural society and the sovereignty of the family unit. The poem's speaker warns that the Southerners who have been left without property or voice will not forget the cruelty of his campaign, and the same poetic voice that exalts the triumphant army and the gathering crowd as a natural force early on now suggests that this unity also strengthens difference and destroys marginalized voices, as "wailing" implies. Melville takes up this Southern voice more fully in the following poem, "The Frenzy in the Wake." Told in the voice of an angry Southerner who describes the same army's march through the Carolinas, the poem relates the march from the perspective of a victim. Cursing the Northerners, the defeated Southerner bewails the shame that defeat has brought on the Confederacy by noting the upended social structure: "And the African—the imp!/He gibbers, imputing shame" (140). Even so, the Southerner cryptically implies, the latent power of a Southern white collective is already building: "The ghosts of our slain appeal:/ 'Vain shall our victories be?'/But back from its ebb the flood recoils—/Back in a whelming sea" (140).

Melville thus depicts the loss of voice and individuality not only in terms of the violent force of mechanized warfare, but also in terms of the collective effort and mass consensus that occurs on the war's edges. This force is often depicted as an unstoppable

river, a raging cataract, or an undulating sea. Those who enter this watery mass do gain agency in the form of collective victory and power, but as individuals they also become as invisible as the "swallowed" sailors in "The Cumberland" (82). Melville also questions the efficacy of art and poetry that depicts war in terms of heroism, glory, and nature in poems such as "In the Turret" and "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight." Other poems in the collection question the role of the poet on a more fundamental level. In poems such as "The Portent" and "Shiloh," Melville introduces secondary speaker voices to destabilize the central subject position of the poet and suggest that the lyric I of traditional poetry also no longer reflects the realities of war and modernity.

Melville immediately establishes an unstable platform from which to view *Battle-Pieces* in the volume's short but befuddling prologue. Enclosed in the type of square parenthetical brackets that evoke an editor's habit of inserting relevant but extraneous information into another writer's text, the prologue is both a claim of authority and an introduction of uncertainty:

> [With few exceptions, the Pieces in this volume originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond. They were composed without reference to collective arrangement, but being brought together in review, naturally fall into the order assumed.
>
> The events and incidents of the conflict—making up a whole, in varied amplitude, corresponding with the geographical area covered by the war—from these but a few themes have been taken, such as for any cause chanced to imprint themselves upon the mind.
>
> The aspects which the strife as a memory assumes are as manifold as are the moods of involuntary meditation—moods variable, and at times widely at

> variance. Yielding instinctively, one after another, to feelings not inspired from any one source exclusively, and unmindful, without purposing to be, of consistency, I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted arias which wayward winds have played upon the strings.] (v)

Terms such as "instinctively" and "inspired," and phrases such as "involuntary meditation" and "naturally fall into the order assumed," suggest that an organic connection with the events depicted within *Battle-Pieces* inspires the ordering of the poems within the collection, as well as the poems' content. The Romantic image of the Aeolian harp in the passage's final sentence further establishes the poet's artistic process as one of inspiration through a state of negative capability. Yet the long, ungainly ending sentence also suggests that for Melville, as the volume's compiler, such sensitivities seem as untrustworthy as they are heightened. Themes are mechanically "imprinted upon the mind," rather than arising from genius. The extraneous brackets that enclose the text of the prologue also evoke a mechanical typesetting or printing process, and artificially separate the prologue from the rest of the volume, even though the passage occurs on a separate page, before the table of contents. Melville presents his book as arising from Romantic, organic genius, but he implies that collecting and organizing the inspiration arising from the war's "wayward winds" is a fragmenting, mechanical, and uncertain exercise.

The separating brackets also foreshadow a poetic device that occurs throughout the poems of *Battle-Pieces*: the use of typographical devices to introduce a voice that is separate from what at first appears to be a central poetic voice. Most often indicated with parentheses or placed in separate stanzas, these secondary poetic voices are also

sometimes indicated with dashes or italics. These statements represent separate voices that comment on the poems, but without creating a back-and-forth dialogue that builds toward a consensus or indicates a philosophical dilemma. Instead, these secondary voices intrude upon the poem from the outside, as if spoken by a knowledgeable mediator or even a fellow reader.

The initial poem of *Battle-Pieces*, "The Portent (1859)," which serves as a second prologue of sorts for the collection, includes both italicized text and parentheses. This poem does not appear in the book's table of contents, and is the only fully italicized poem in *Battle-Pieces*. As the poem's title implies, "The Portent" presages the collection as a whole, setting a foreboding atmosphere for the death and violence contained in subsequent poems:

*Hanging from the beam,*
*Slowly swaying (such the law)*
*Gaunt the shadow on your green,*
*Shenandoah!*
*The cut is on the crown*
*(Lo, John Brown),*
*And the stabs shall heal no more.*

*Hidden in the cap*
*Is the anguish none can draw;*
*So your future veils its face,*
*Shenandoah!*
*But the streaming beard is shown*

*(Weird John Brown),*

*The meteor of war.* (51)

The poem depicts the execution of the uncompromising abolitionist John Brown, whose fiery rhetoric and violent actions represent the nation's failure to overcome the bitter slavery debate through negotiation or language. While abolitionists and sympathizers saw Brown as a man who faithfully followed the inherent justice of natural law, others, North and South, saw him as the vicious partisan who slaughtered five proslavery settlers in Kansas. After federal troops captured Brown during his raid to free slaves at Harper's Ferry, the state of Virginia condemned him to death by hanging. "The Portent" ruminates upon the image of his silent corpse as it swings on the gallows.

Brown's elevated body, the poem's pendulum imagery, and the swaying typography introduce a sense of impending doom, of the "future moving within the present" (Adler 136) as Brown's shadow travels across the green. Allusions to Christian crucifixion—the beam, "the cut is on the crown," and "the stabs shall heal no more"—establish Brown as a silent martyr in the first stanza, but the second stanza complicates this representation. Brown's cap, or execution hood, covers his face to make the abolitionist's death anonymous and universal, prefiguring the widespread slaughter that would occur in following years. Yet "cap" can also be read as an allusion to the percussion cap of a rifle, the key mechanism that ignites the loud explosion propelling a bullet. This conceit is taken up again at the poem's end, as the "meteor of war" might signify a fired bullet as well as the cosmic body that is often interpreted as a portent. This conceit suggests Brown is an active agent in triggering the violence to come, rather than a passive martyr or victim of a legal injustice. Melville's central poetic voice thus offers both interpretations of Brown—the lawless criminal who instigated the Civil War with

his explosive words and deeds, and the silent martyr whose symbolic death promises to reconcile the nation's original sin. As "the anguish none can draw" suggests, the true nature of Brown is beyond the powers of direct observation as his hooded corpse swings from the beam.

"The anguish none can draw" also indicates that the visual image the poem provides is ambiguous, and that the poem's central voice points to inherently unknowable signs, such as the abolitionist's long beard, his silent corpse, and the distanced comet. However, the poem's parenthetical asides introduce a second voice that fills these empty symbols with contextual meaning, placing them within the national debate over slavery. Taken separately, as if the parenthetical remarks emanate from the central poetic speaker as mere asides, the remarks simply add ambiguity to the poem. Zoe Trodd notes that, within the text, "the poem's subject is hidden in parenthesis, hooded like Brown's face: '(Lo John Brown),' '(weird John Brown)'" (Trodd 51). Yet taken together, as if the parenthetical remarks emanate from a second speaker altogether, the remarks comment on the changing role of the poet during wartime.

The first parenthetical statement—"(such the law)"—alludes to both the law of gravity that regulates Brown's swaying body and the governmental laws that resulted in Brown's execution. The tension between the natural law that denoted slavery as cruel injustice and the official law that upheld the Southern states' right to own slaves led to the Civil War; at the time of Brown's execution, the direction the country would take hung in the balance, much like Brown's body. Yet in stating "such the law" in the singular, Melville's parenthetical voice combines these two laws to point out that natural law and official law are both present in the hangman's noose. The noose is employed to enforce an official law that many Americans felt was unjust in Brown's case, yet it relies

upon the natural law of gravity to complete its task. "Such the law," then, introduces this combination of natural and official law as a conceit that is taken up in the poem's final line. Pulled into its path by the Earth's gravity, the "meteor of war" also represents the bullets that enforce federal law. The poem's overall pendulum motion might suggest that the power of natural law and man's law alternate over time, or that the two laws are being weighed as if the gallows beam supports the scales of justice, but the parenthetical voice points to the melding of these laws, or a coming naturalization of official law.

The second parenthetical statement, "(Lo, John Brown)," is a vague interjection that at first appears to call attention to the cut on Brown's head, thus underscoring his Christ-like martyrdom. However, "Lo" also signifies its homophone "low," which, as a corollary to the elevated position of Brown's corpse, evokes the grave. Familiar with the popular Union marching song, "John Brown's Body," many of Melville's contemporaries might have been predisposed to this image upon first encountering the poem. The song's first line places Brown's corpse "a-mouldering in the grave" (Nudelman 15). In the grave, the body returns to natural law and natural elements lead to its decomposition.

The third parenthetical statement—"(Weird John Brown)"—underscores the poem's general sense that Brown's corpse is the portent of future death and destruction, but also injects uncertainty. According to the *OED*, "weird" denotes fate, destiny, and, when used as a noun, the soothsayer. Brown's statements before the execution that his death would lead to war and abolition proved prophetic, to be sure (Nudelman 55). Yet in story and myth, fate, destiny and the soothsayer's words are always open to interpretation and most commonly misinterpreted. Prophecies come to pass, yet in ways that the interested parties who seek to know the future do not envision. The parenthetical comments, taken together, imply that Brown's swinging corpse similarly portends

unforeseen consequences. The combining of natural law and official law might lead to justice, but it will also result in the silencing and dissolution of the individual.

The parenthesized, secondary poetic voice in "The Portent" adds depth to the poem while questioning the poem's central speaker's reliance on ambiguous symbol and imagery. In pulling apart images in which natural law and man's law meld, Melville also points to the naturalization of symbol and poetry, and how poetic language is empowered in this dynamic yet masks reality to mythologize the unjust or the arbitrary. While "The Portent" points to the violence and destruction the war would soon visit upon the nation, it also signals a renegotiation of poetry, one in which symbol, verse, and voice will be isolated and examined throughout the volume.

Similar parenthetical poetic voices provide added, or alternate, meanings to poems throughout *Battle-Pieces*, often injecting subversive irony that questions a poem's ostensible central voice even more directly. In "Shiloh," for instance, a single parenthetical comment interrogates the pastoral imagery and reverent tone that dominate the rest of the poem. This pastoral imagery, along with the poem's symbolism, and even rhyme scheme, makes "Shiloh" one of the collection's more aesthetically pleasing works for modern readers:

> SKIMMING lightly, wheeling still,
>
> The swallows fly low
>
> Over the field in clouded days,
>
> The forest-field of Shiloh—
>
> Over the field where April rain
>
> Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
>
> Through the pause of night

That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there—
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh. (90)

Subtitled "*A Requiem*," the poem's opening image of swallows "Skimming lightly, wheeling still" over a silent field surrounding the small wooden church create the sense that time has passed and nature has reclaimed the now-peaceful battlefield. As the poem progresses, it moves back in time to describe the same scene immediately after the battle, recalling the "parting groan" and "natural prayer" of dying soldiers, whose voices echo off the small church's walls. Picking up from the swallows of the poem's opening lines, the voices of these "parched" soldiers continue an oral conceit that concludes in the final line, where the poem's calming central voice asks the reader to share a quiet, memorial perspective while remembering the lost voices of those soldiers. The poem's final line—"All is hushed at Shiloh"—invites quiet contemplation of nature's healing properties.

Toward the end of the piece, Melville breaks the poem's rhythm with dashes, then interrupts it altogether with a parentheses: "Of dying foemen mingled there—/Foemen at

morn, but friends at eve—/Fame or country least their care: (What like a bullet can undeceive!)." The dashes initially break the rhythm of the poem only slightly, and the phrase within them serves as a further reminder that the natural humanity of the dying combatants transcended nationalistic pride and the glorification of war. The exclamatory comment within the parentheses is a much more violent imposition upon the poem. This brash statement, inappropriate in tone and bordering on sarcasm, "reflects the highly disillusioned, realistic, or naturalistic perspectives of a man who is faced with the chaos of experience" (Jalal 78). The "Nay-sayer's voice," as Mustafa Jalal terms it, reminds readers that the field around the small church was the scene of horrific conflict (78). Further, it implies that the statement set off with dashes—"Foemen at morn, but friends at eve"—is a cliché that implies death leads to truth. The subversive, parenthesized poetic voice ultimately interrogates the opening pastoral scene, which hides from view the freshly dug graves of the soldiers that are alluded to in the closing lines. The single statement thus questions a traditional poetic form's efficacy in communicating the violent reality of warfare, while the poem as a whole explodes the mythologies that emerge when war is memorialized.

In "A Canticle," Melville describes a poetry that eschews the mythologies of war in favor of a description of larger historical and cultural movements. The poems of *Battle-Pieces* are ordered according to a strict chronology that follows the war, and "A Canticle" occurs immediately following "The Surrender at Appomattox," a poem that marks the end of armed conflict. The title of "A Canticle" denotes collective voice in the form of a short hymn, one that initially appears to celebrate the end of the war and the path that history has taken. The poem's subtitle—"Significant of the national exaltation of enthusiasm at the close of the War"—initially strengthens this sense, yet "Significant"

suggests ambiguity in regard to the nature of the poem's commentary on the national enthusiasm. The poem describes a cataract that falls into a gorge and deep pool of water, producing a rainbow, or Iris, that arches over the scene intermittently. The Iris, which also evokes the natural beauty of the flower of that name, or the vision of the eye, denotes art or the poet. Taking the Iris as an eye, the cataract might denote "a disease to the eyes that constitutes an additional threat," as Elizabeth Renker notes (115). Taken as a rainbow, the Iris might be seen as an atomized product of the river of humanity it arches over, a product of larger society yet transcendent of it.

The refrain of "A Canticle" repeats twice, each time identifying the nation and the masses in terms of water. "Mysterious as the tide," this body moves with "emotion like an ocean" in the refrain's initial iteration (144). In its second occurrence, the refrain notes the "Generations pouring" and "flowing," suggesting the movement of history that fills the pool (144-45). Both iterations evoke "The Lord of hosts victorious" and note the unstoppable nature of the confluence: "By a wondrous way and glorious/A passage Thou dost find--/A passage thou dost find:/Hosanna to the Lord of hosts,/the hosts of human kind" (144-45). While the refrain plainly identifies the torrent with collective humanity, here the masses do not represent the chaos of an army or the anger of an unruly mob. The natural power of their forward motion cuts through rock to create a singular path that is as unavoidable as fate or God's will. At the same time, the violent crashing of the torrent's entry into the water is muted.

The poem's primary stanzas depict the gorge and its rainbow, initially describing the power of the waterfall in terms of a "congregated Fall" (144). Here, in the opening stanza, American society shares in an original sin, but through the passage of history a cleansing action takes place as the waters converge in a "Solidity of surge" to form the

deep pool (144). The poem turns to a closer description of the Iris, or poet, in the third stanza:

> Stable in its baselessness
>
> When calm is in the air,
>
> The Iris half in tracelessness
>
> Hovers faintly fair.
>
> Fitfully assailing it
>
> A wind from heaven blows,
>
> Shivering and paling it
>
> To blankness of the snows;
>
> While incessant in renewal,
>
> The Arch rekindled grows,
>
> Till again the gem and jewel
>
> Whirl in blinding overthrows—
>
> Till, prevailing and transcending,
>
> Lo, the Glory perfect there,
>
> And the contest finds an ending,
>
> For repose is in the air. (144-45)

The first four lines describe art or poetry in times of peace, as the Iris is visible "when calm is in the air." Hovering "in its baselessness," this art is both artifice and grounded in nature, as "gem and jewel" imply. The winds of war assail the Iris in following lines and its aesthetic beauty disappears, as "paling" and the "blankness of snows" suggest. Yet "incessant in renewal," the Iris re-forms once again in peacetime, or when "repose is in the air." While the Iris cannot reflect the river of history and deep pool of humanity

during times of war in this stanza, the following stanza implies that the reconstituted rainbow is disconnected from the deep movements of society in times of peace:

> But the foamy Deep unsounded,
>
> And the dim and dizzy ledge,
>
> And the booming roar rebounded,
>
> And the gull that skims the edge!
>
> The Giant of the pool
>
> Heaves his forehead white as wool—
>
> Toward the Iris ever climbing
>
> From the Cataracts that call—
>
> Irremovable vast arras
>
> Draping all the wall. (145)

Here the Iris is not threatened by the prevailing winds of war, but by the spray and foam produced when the powerful torrent enters the pool. This torrent is once again closely tied to history in the image of the vast arras, or tapestry, which traditionally might depict important scenes from historical events. The tapestry remains in place regardless of the wind, suggesting the steady flow of history whether that history occurs during war or peace. In contrast, the existence of the Iris is contingent on the torrent, yet not part of it, even retreating from it. Thus, the Iris does not contribute to an understanding of the action occurring when the torrent of history feeds the deep and mysterious pool of humanity or culture. In other words, while the Iris in "A Canticle" breaks down and disappears during wartime, during peace it is a mere reflection that retreats from cultural and historical phenomena.

The presence of white imagery in this poem also suggests that traditional poetic form as represented in the Iris will be ineffectual in depicting the deep cultural movements taking place in the torrent and pool. More specifically, art that attempts to transcend culture threatens to erase the place that African Americans have taken within the new social order of the early Reconstruction period. In "March to the Sea," Melville pointedly includes freed slaves in the body of humanity that follows Sherman's army, while the Confederate voice in "The Frenzy in the Wake," suggests that the "gibbers" of "the African" threaten the old social order (140). In "A Canticle," the foreboding rise of the Giant of the Pool, with his "forehead white as wool," evokes whiteness and possibly a culture that has been based on cotton (145). As it rises from the depths, the Giant might represent the "apotheosis of humanity, now growing 'toward the fullness of her fate' in the restored and renewed America," as Stanton Garner argues, but that America is dominated by a whiteness that erases the reader's view of the pool and the black voices that have recently entered it (52). The white foam and spray also feeds the Iris, a collection of reflective water particles that emanate from the Giant, suggesting that poetry must change at a fundamental level if it is to sound the depths of American culture, rather than reflect its whiteness from above. In a poem that marks the end of the Civil War, then, Melville calls for a more diverse poetry, one emanating from voices that, like the Iris, reflect mass society in an atomized fashion rather than create mythologies from the privileged perspective of the lyric "I."

The title of Melville's book of Civil War poetry, with an emphasis on "Aspects," along with the volume's idiosyncratic and seemingly piecemeal structure, collectively illustrates the view of poetry found in "The Canticle" perhaps more than many of the individual poems within the volume. A growing body of promising historical inquiry and

literary criticism has begun to trace the cultural changes Americans experienced during the Civil War through the examination of wartime songs, advertisements, diaries, journals, newspaper articles and magazine stories. Through this lens, the vast number of private and popular texts surviving the war has come to represent a piecemeal war literature that captures a social reordering and "significant changes in the imagined connection between individuals and nation" (Fahs 11). Fewer studies examine in a similar light singular works traditionally thought of as literary. The lack of attention to wartime novels and poems as evidence of rapidly changing ideas about self and nation has resulted in the lingering perception that the American Civil War failed to produce a great singular work, one that encapsulates the war's profound significance to the nation and its inhabitants. *Battle-Pieces* represents Herman Melville's attempt to convey within a single work the rapid changes of self and nation that occurred during the war. To do so, Melville uses voice, and the absence of voice, as a poetic device not only to depict the erasure of individuality that occurs when societies come into armed conflict, but also to point to cultural changes in notions of individuality occurring at the war's periphery. At the same time, Melville's war voices acknowledge his own inability to capture the lost voices of the war with dominant modes of poetry. Although the poems' at times awkward prosody, artificially elevated language, and inconsistent voices may have obscured their depth and experimentation from many readers and critics, they point to the rapid fragmentation and re-incorporation of a nation's poetry, as well as its political structure.

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